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Cindy McGrew Oral History Interview

Rhianna Neel, Interviewer

Traveling Tails Inn, Glen Carbon, Illinois

October 8, 2018

Rhianna Neel (RN): Okay, the date is October 8, 2018, and I am Rhianna Neel, and I am interviewing Cindy McGrew who is the owner of Traveling Tails Inn in Glen Carbon. Hello Cindy.

Cindy McGrew (CM): Hello Rhianna.

RN: Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

CM: I grew up in a small town, about an hour south of here, um, thirteen hundred population, so I attended school K through 12th grade with the same class of 30 people. Real small town.

RN: Mm-hmm. And when did you decide that you wanted to become a teacher?

CM: You know, I love learning, and I loved school for myself. And so when I went to college, I thought well if I love learning so much and being in school, then I must love – I will love teaching school.

RN: And what was your time in university like? Did you have any experiences that shaped your career?

CM: Well, I went to SIUE, and I did spend some time volunteering on Special Olympics. I worked very briefly in the child daycare center, preschool, so that gave me a lot of insight into the future as working with kids. So that made me say I probably want to lean toward older students.

RN: When you got into the workforce as a teacher, what was your experience teaching?

CM: Well, I feel like teachers have the least amount of training. [pause] Well let me just say this– a-and I hear this from veterinarians too – so they'll teach you everything you need to be a vet medical-wise, but they don't teach you how to manage a vet clinic. When you're a teacher, you're really a manager. And I can know my subject, and I can present it in a fun way, but if I don't know how to manage a classroom and all the politics that go with a school, I think that's something that was missing from my education or uh learning for going to school to be a teacher. So, when I was quickly thrown into a real big learning experience with a classroom of kids.

RN: And would you say that that experience has shaped how you approach the daycare situation here with all of the dogs?

CM: Yes. I learned that I had to step back, make my own plan when no one makes one for me, like in the teaching career, and, um, just be very organized and prepared. Think things through.

RN: Um, so, I know that you backed out of teaching and decided to go back for your counseling

CM: Right.

RN: Licensing. And did you like counseling more than teaching?

CM: Uh, I loved school counseling. Um, being – I am more of a person who works better either one-on-one or by myself. So, I found that being in a classroom of 30 or 40 students, whether they were middle school, elementary, those were the two levels I taught, um, I – I like relationship building and I like talking with people, so being a school counselor allowed me to talk one on one with parents, one on one with students, and so getting my master's in counseling was a great career move for me and a much better match with my personality.

RN: And did the experience you had while working as a counselor or a teacher shape the way that you manage your employees or even the dogs in daycare, or you know, communicating with the customers here about how their dog is behaving?

CM: Absolutely. I think that's one of the main reasons why our business has been so successful and grown. Because it's based on relationship building, whether it be a dog, uh one of our staff members, or the customers. And, so, in order to have a business like this you have to be able to build relationships with all those three people. [laughs] I talked about, I call dogs people sometimes. So yes, my counseling background has made the culture of this business different from a corporate environment, and different from really just a mom and pop. It's different.

RN: It is. Um, so how did you meet Chris?

CM: Chris and I met um, in 1996, and um, just through a, a group of friends.

RN: And what made you two decide you were gonna come up with this crazy plan to leave teaching behind and open a doggy daycare?

CM: Well, one of the things that um, allowed Chris and I to become pretty close friends was our love of dogs and animals. And we would do activities with our dogs together and so, um... [pause] Ask me that question one more time?

RN: What made you decide that you were just gonna leave behind teaching and pursue opening TTI?

CM: Okay, um, well, first of all, I saw a need. Because when I tried to find a place for my own dogs to stay, I didn't really find exactly what I would want for my own dog, and um, not that there was anything wrong with it, it just wasn't what I envisioned of how I want my dog – where I want my dog staying when I can't be with her. So, that's why Chris and I basically just decided to leave education slowly, we didn't leave right away, and open a business and give it a try.

RN: And can you explain why TTI is so much different from all the other daycares and boarding facilities around here? What makes it unique?

CM: Well, I think it can be--it can apply to any business. If you want to have a unique small business, you have to be a people person. You have to build relationships and trust with the public. And today's society where we have so much, uh, social media and not – people are less and less understanding how to communicate one-on-one and pick up on social cues and things like that because we're all texting, doing social media. When someone walks into a business and they find the personal touch and feel that someone really is interested in what you're doing in their business, why you're there, then you build a business culture that is different and I don't care if you're taking care of dogs or selling turtles or selling cars, I don't care what you're doing, if you do it in that way, you build that culture of "we care about you individually, we get to know you individually," and that is [beeping] the foundation of a good small business.

RN: Mm-hmm, that is. Um, and, just explain what the daycare layout, too – what makes TTI unique.

CM: Okay, so, most um dog kennels, uhm, [pause] have a business model where dogs come in, they are put in a kennel, and then they're rotated around for play time. And there's, there's a lot of talk in the industry about what's best for dogs. We know dogs need rest breaks but for me personally, and for my own dog, I don't want my dog sitting in a kennel for hours. I'd like my dog to be with people, I'd like for my dog to be with other dogs – as long as my dog enjoys being with other dogs. So, our business model is very unique in that our daycare dogs spend the whole day interacting with other dogs, and people, and then they're kenneled at night, and we're here 24 hours a day. Um, so it's almost like we make a second home for a dog. We try to mirror their schedule at home. Although they probably do sleep less here. [laughs] So.

RN: Especially if Ernie's boarding. [laughs]

CM: Right.

RN: Uh, did you or Chris have any background in dog training or grooming before you opened this business?

CM: I had absolutely no experience in – in dog training or grooming, um, but I have always been interested in dog nutrition, doing what's best for my own dogs, um, now Chris, she had a background in uh, dog training. She had worked and taken a lot of obedience classes and um, so then she became certified while we were still in education as a dog trainer, and she went to grooming school, so she brings the most hands-on experience.

RN: And did you have any business experience prior to this?

CM: Absolutely none.

RN: And have you uh, picked up business knowledge just as you go?

CM: Well, I quickly found out that I would have to become a learner again, because I – I was in the business and I thought, okay I know dogs, we know dogs, and what we want for dogs, woah, there's this whole other aspect of business. And so we went to seminars, we talked to other business people, we joined a group called Score, where uh business leaders will help people who are just starting out. So any

resource I could find, I really went to because no, we really knew nothing about the business side of it.

RN: And, did you face any challenges such as finding a place that was zoned properly or getting loans to open this place, um, any financial setbacks?

CM: We opened in 2008, during one of the worst recessions in this country. However, we were both educators, and when you work in a school you're kind of sheltered, so we didn't really know we were in a recession. And yes, it financially almost destroyed us opening this business. Zoning, we were lucky that we found this place and that's difficult – most places don't want dogs in the business district, so this was a good place to find, it's way too expensive a building to have doggy daycare in, and that was part of the glitch in our business plan, but we worked it out.

RN: And how would you say the number of doggy daycares in the area has changed since you opened?

CM: I think that before we opened, now out on the West Coast, doggy daycare has been going on since the 70s. Around here, people still, I don't think, get the concept. Because when someone says we do dog daycare, how they do it is so different from how we do it. So, I see more businesses that would be kind of competition, but no one really does what we do, so I don't really consider them big competition, and they'll say "we do doggy daycare," but no one does doggy daycare all day like we do, but they are trying to maybe change that because they see our perceived success, and then they find out on the bottom line side that really, really jacks up your payroll. So you have to really be careful when running a business where you have all-day daycare, but I think people are trying it out. In fact, someone moved in down the street, much smaller. And for me, I'm great with that because we have people to refer dogs to that we can't fit in.

RN: And how would you say small business that is dog oriented has changed around here? Such as the food stores, and the treat stores.

CM: Mmm, I think that everyone used to just spend lots of money on their dogs, and now I think people spend lots and lots and lots of money in every area – nutrition, uh grooming, anything for dogs. And um, these stores in – in Edwardsville, Four Muddy Paws, um the nat- all-natural health food store has really brought together a community of people who basically will spend any amount of money on their dog. They'll give up something personally to put the money on their dog. And that's the kind of atmosphere of this community – and a lot of communities, that's why it's a multi-billion-dollar industry.

RN: And would you say, too, the number of dog parks and dog owners and all that has shot up since this place opened?

CM: Yes, and dog parks are a little scary to me because when you have a business model like ours, people might look at it and say "oh that's just like the dog park!", but it's not, because there's no one there who's trained in dog behavior and knows what to look for. So I think people just want to do a lot with their dogs, but I think that the owner has to be an advocate for their dog and make sure they're taking their dog to a safe environment. But yeah, it's crazy – dog parks everywhere, dog food stores popping up.

RN: And uh, would you say that the way people who--ah, treat their pets has changed since 2008, like, has it always been a trend that people "oh, my dog's my baby, this is my child" or has that become a

recent development would you say?

CM: I think that when we opened in 2008, there were a lot of people who wanted to be that person you just described, and they didn't have any place to go. And I think we became that place for them.

RN: And what would you say about pit bulls? How has their reputation in Edwardsville changed over the years, what do you think?

CM: Well, I know there's a lot of legislature in different states about banning the pit bull, and some states have banned them, and some kennels won't take them. Um, but we um, have a, an evaluation process in which I'm not going to discriminate on the breed, I'm gonna look at behavior and play style. So, I think a lot of people are, were much scareder of the pit bull a few years ago, and it's becoming more accepted that pit bulls can be very good pets, just like any dog can be bad or good, it's the owner that makes the difference.

RN: And wouldn't you say a good portion of our customers are pit owners?

CM: I'd say they all love those pitties! And if they have a chance to get one, they're going to, or it's gonna be a mix, you know, it's your true pit bull category is a mix of that bully breed, so.

RN: Oh, yeah.

CM: Yeah, they love them. For the most part. That's why I think when one of our competitions moved into Maryville and they banned pit bulls and I think that might hurt them. But obviously they have a reason for that, which I don't know. We don't feel that way.

RN: And what would you say is the hardest part of running a business in Madison County?

CM: In Madison County number one, the property taxes are sky high. Financial issue there.

Um, you have to be prepared to pay a lot to have a business even in the state of Illinois. Pay roll taxes. Madison County has been very cooperative as far as zoning, and accepting of our business, um, so I haven't run into any roadblocks specific to Madison County.

RN: That's good. And whenever you opened the business – I know Chris has talked to me before about some of the issues – flooring changes, and becoming...

CM: [laughs] Right.

RN: What were some of the transformations that the building itself had to go through to become what it is?

CM: Well, this building was a warehouse with nice offices in the front, warehouse space in the back. So we had to totally transform the warehouse into a place where dogs could be and not your typical kennel look. So we had to make it look like it wasn't a kennel. So we had to try different kinds of flooring, and then we quickly found out that real grass out there lasts about two weeks when you have about ten dogs. And um, so we spent a lot of money. Trial and error. What works best for dogs. Cause you know when

you have one dog in your house the destruction that can take place, multiply that times 100. So, did that answer your question?

RN: Hmm, I'm looking for, um the story in particular of how we ended up with turf and not...I

know we went through several different...

CM: Oh, okay.

RN: Types.

CM: So outside, and this is just another thing I've watched small business owners and they...you can't foresee something happening and then all of a sudden it's a need. So, pretty soon we have a back yard full of mud. Oh no, what are we gonna do. So then we put pea gravel out there, tiny rocks. Well, the dogs are sinking down into that and they're eating the gravel. So then we get rubber mats and we cover it up with that. Well, then those uh, smell because urine goes under there and gets caught, and they're heavy. So that didn't work, it wasn't good for our employees. So finally we said we've got to put down turf. So that was a big investment. And we've done it twice now. So, it's kinda like, you have to have good financial backing, because you will have to spend some money, and you will have to make upgrades. If you want to be something that no one else offers in the area of dogs. You know, and, just the main thing - the building. You can't have dogs running around in the mud [laughs] you know.

RN: And—

CM: This is one tiny example.

RN: And are there any others that I haven't heard stories about?

CM: Oh yeah! I was up here at midnight uh, a few years – five or six years ago, painting the floor in the daycare because we would paint it, every so often, and then it would chip off, and on the webcams, which by the way that's another thing unique to our business, we have the webcams where people can see, and still businesses don't usually have that. So I was painting the floor. Well that lasts about three weeks, then it looks like poop back there because the flaking off on the camera. So we then spent a bunch of money to have a professional put down epoxy, and as soon as he got it down it looked beautiful, but guess what. It was slick! And then we had to deal with that. And so, yes, lots of research. Lots of – it's good to get in a group of people who own these businesses all over the country, which I am in, and then you can maybe try to avoid some of those mistakes that are costly, They'll give you that heads up, because they're pretty nice in this industry, to help each other out.

RN: And, would you say in this area you faced any discrimination as far as being a female business owner or being a member of the LGBT community, either from you know, people that you have to go to, to get your permits or customers or--

CM: Mm-hmm.

RN: Any of the employees?

CM: I think that um, in the beginning when we were applying for a business license and Chris and I being a couple, we did hit some roadblocks, maybe, uh, a white male wouldn't have hit. Because we are women and because we are a couple. So, I think it made it a little harder. Now, that was in 2008. So now here we are 10+ years later. Customers don't care about those things when you take good care of their dog. Um, and employees, I haven't had any--anyone have objection to that, but you know, you have to be transparent in a small business, but you also have to be careful about your personal life too. But that's a good question. No, we fortunately haven't had to face much discrimination unless it was talking behind our backs, but you know that happens to everyone about everything so. But, but they, and I will tell you this, there was one couple who said basically that they would not come here because Chris and I were lesbians. And they went to another place and about 3 months later they were back, full-time customers. So, when you take good care of someone's dog, that's really all that matters.

RN: And what do you see in Traveling Tails Inn's future? Do you think that you will expand, or do you want to stay in one small location and stay...simple?

CM: Lots and lots of people have asked us that question, do you want to franchise, why don't you put another one here, there, customers move away and "will you please build another one in Florida", you know, if they leave, they want it where they moved to. And, um, Chris and I made this change late in life, so we are older now, I'm 55, um, we are looking more towards retirement, so, um, even if I wasn't looking towards retirement, I would say that franchising this business would cause it to lose some of its appeal. That I find if I'm gonna own it, it has to be there. That personal touch. That knowing each customer, knowing the unique things about the dogs. When you start franchising, you have to have a really tight business plan and you have to have all of those procedures down and then you have to talk about staff. So, that's not something that I would be interested in at this age, and even if I was younger, someone would have to really do some talking to make me think that we could franchise this and duplicate it everywhere, like a McDonalds, you know. Pretty much you get a hamburger at McDonald's in California, it's gonna be the same as in Edwardsville, but I don't know that that works for doggy daycare.

RN: I feel like in doggy daycare, every day is different depending on which pack shows up.

CM: Yes. So it's hard to get systems down that work consistently because this variable is these different dog groups, where at McDonald's you have the same machine, same meat, same, you know, you have a lot of same things you deal with. We're dealing with dogs, it's different every day.

RN: And it definitely creates a challenge for the business.

CM: Yes.

RN: Uh, creating formalized procedure and policy when Charles is gonna decide "Nope, I'm kicking this wall in."

CM: Right.

RN: And, um would you say that your experiences running a daycare have shaped the way that you approach training and handling your own dogs at home?

CM: Oh yes. Definitely. We, um...Because we're always learning, and because we try to provide our staff as much um, professional development or ideas all these up and coming things, so we learned that too, it's important. So, then, of course, we have to try it out on our own dogs any new classes, like we do scent detection work and we've learned--what we've learned, I would say just to summarize, is have fun with your dog, not just here at daycare and bringing them here, but plan things to do with them on your own. So you have to have a good balance for your dog. And I think we've learned that, you know. We were just with our dogs all the time and we need to let our dogs come here and be a dog, and then we need to spend some time doing one on one quality things. It's not about quantity, it's about quality with your dogs.

RN: Mm-hmm. And, um, what words of wisdom...

CM: Did I answer your question?

RN: I think so, yeah.

CM: Yeah, okay.

RN: Uh, what words of wisdom would you have for pet owners in the area as far as, you know, I know you've had several dogs in your life that have lived their lives with you and moved on. What would you say to the pet owners who have young dogs now?

CM: I would say the number one thing for dogs is nutrition. Because everyone loves their dogs, they want them to live a full life, and nutrition is so important, and as a puppy, socialization, which we provide. I think those are the two most important things.

RN: And crate training.

CM: Yes. [laughs] Crate training. And potty training.

RN: Please crate train your dog [laughs].

CM: Right.

RN: And then I have just a little fun question uh, to lighten the mood a little, too.

CM: Okay.

RN: If your dog could understand perfect English for one full minute, what would you want her to know?

CM: Oh, I would want her to know that I would risk my life for her, I would buy her anything she needs, and that she fills the void in my life that is unbelievable. And that I love, love, love her! [laughs] And that she's so cute! [laughs] I think that's more than one minute. It's hard. That's a good question, I like that.

RN: Alright, is there anything else really that you want to share about insights you've learned from running a business, or uh, from having dogs in your life for your whole life, or...

CM: I think, running a small business will go down as the biggest learning experience of my life. And I

have learned – had to learn that I don't just report somewhere and do what people tell me to do, I have free time, so I have to be organized. I have to have good time management. And then the other thing is, running a small business you have to just be really prepared, but you can't be so anal that you can't be flexible. Because anything can change from day to day, and then you're always on, so even if you don't work in the business, like Chris and I do not work in here physically forty hours a week, um, but, it is never out of my head. So if you want a job that you can leave at the building, do not open a small business.

RN: And then, would you say-

CM: And with pets, I couldn't be happier, I feel like over the last ten plus years, Chris and I have had, we went to school here, SIU, we're part of the community, and we have had so many people in the community when we're out and about say "oh thank you for taking such good care of my dog, or my dog did this or that", that's a good feeling cause everyone wants something in life where you can kinda say-- not your--well kinda like a legacy, you know, so these two lesbians Chris and Cindy, they came and opened this crazy place where dogs just run around all day with people, and it's a new concept, and it worked, and people are thanking us for it. And, and so, that's one of the top ten happiest things in my life.

RN: And, too, you know, another part of the challenges this business has faced, that I think we're working towards a lot of positivity is keeping employees—

CM: Yes.

RN: Updated on what is the newest training, and the "Dog Guru" things that we've been doing.

CM: You're exactly right. And in any--in life, relationships, small business, it's about communication. And it's so hard to have good communication in a work setting, but then one like this, it's just so crucial. And we just keep trying to reinvent it and make it right. And that's one thing we'll never do as long as we own the business. We will always keep working to improve and support our employees and do what's best for dogs.

RN: Alright, well I think that will conclude the interview, so thank you for your time.

CM: Thank you for interviewing me. I appreciate you thinking about me.

RN: Alright, I'll stop the recording.